

The Beasts of Love

HE LAY FACE UP ON HIS SIDE OF THE bed and stared at the dark expanse of ceiling. The hall clock chimed the hour. Two o'clock, he thought, and all is ... well

The final chime faded. He found himself listening as the house talked to itself, murmuring deep in its throat. Wood creaked and groaned, and somewhere far down in the house the thermostat clicked with a sound not so much actually heard as sensed. The house seemed to throb in time with the air conditioner's rumblings. After an eternity, the rumblings ceased. The machinery settled down. He heard soft whirs and purrings and tried separating them, identifying them, willing each in its turn to stop and let him go back to sleep. He became aware of the rustle of breath through nostrils.

Bitch, he thought.

There was a flutter of movement near his side.

Goddamn bitch.

The flutter stopped.

Thank you, bitch.

God, he hated her. He did not have to turn his eyes her way to see her. He had seen her on too many occasions, and it would be now as it had been always: the bitch would have kicked the light coverlet down around her calves, would have got her gown twisted up around her breasts, would be sprawled belly up in the semidarkness with her legs bent and spread and looking for all the world like some monstrous pale frog awaiting the point of the dissecting knife.

God, he hated her.

It was not just a matter of many minor annoyances and a number of major ones endured over the years. It had become, early on, much too early on, a matter of retaining them, of collecting them and categorizing them and nurturing each small seed of irritation, disappointment, resentment, until it flowered into disgust and loathing. Someday, he knew, or some night, something would finally snap, and he would erupt like Krakatoa, she would turn to ice, and they would shatter the world as they destroyed each other.

It would come to that.

It could only come to that.

So why don't you get rid of her?

He blinked. He had not intended to think it as baldly as that. He repeated the question in his mind several times and experimented with it, shifting emphasis from the why to the don't and then to the rid. He tried revising the question: So why don't you kick her out?

The question revised itself: So why don't you kick her off?

Murder.

The word almost slipped out of his mouth.

Murder

The sweet, the smooth, the velvet persuasiveness of the word. But ... murder?

But freedom. But no more listening to her as she sprawls there burbling and wheezing. No more watching her waddle about and wondering why, how, you could have married her of all people in the world. No more watching her eat and drink herself to the point of torpor. No more her, and no more this, but freedom and the chance to start all over again, to do it better next time, the way it should be done, to begin afresh

His face itched with sweat. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to moan. Murder. Freedom. My God. Murder. He closed his eyes and sighed softly. The how of it. The when, the where. It had to be done right the first time, the only time. It couldn't be hurried. It had to look good. Murder. Freedom. So why ... He was vaguely amazed to find himself drifting off. So why don't ... He heard the hall clock chime the quarter-hour. So why don't you get rid of her?

Let us pause for a moment. Let us have a brief intermission and a word, as it were, from the sponsor. Let us get something straight.

I am in control here. I will set the stage and adjust the lighting and conduct the incidental music as I pull the strings and make the voices, perhaps a low growl for him, a sharp high squeak for her. We shall see. I will be in charge of the special effects. I will move the drama along, not according to the dictates of any script, but as I see fit from moment to moment. Scripts are for those who are afraid or unable to take chances with their leading characters; I choose spontaneity, improvisation, and who is to say that I am wrong to do so? Who presumes to tell me my craft? I will make the choices. I will direct thoughts and deeds. My puppets will suffer the consequences.

So. Consider. We have before us a man, a husband, and are shortly to have a woman, his wife. They have been married for eleven years. They are unable to explain why they are still together after all those years, though the wife, who is actually the more sensitive if not the more articulate of the two, might (at my prompting, of course) shrug and say to someone whom she implicitly trusts, "Sheer

inertia." There is, however, nobody whom she trusts; I have seen to that. There must be no relief for either of them, no relief of any kind until I will it. We have, then, a hugely unsuccessful marriage of two people who have gone (or, rather, because I am in control here, have been taken) from loving each other to what would seem to be the point of loving hating each other. I know what I am about.

The alarm clock rattled tinnily on the nightstand. With a groan, she rolled onto her belly and buried her face in the pillow. Mattress springs protested. The clock kept ringing. She muttered an obscenity into the pillow, pushed herself up on one elbow, and with her free hand turned off the alarm. She looked around at the man beside her. A smear of drool glistened at the corner of his mouth.

Yuck, she thought.

She got up and padded into the bathroom and relieved herself. The door of the medicine cabinet above the basin had once again swung open of its own accord. She scanned the untidy rows of prescription bottles and aerosol cans of shaving cream, deodorant, hair remover. The aspirin. The vitamin capsules. The sleeping tablets. The tranquilizers. The diet pills. The pep pills. Jesus, what a clutter.

She flushed the commode and washed her hands. As she brushed her teeth, she took one of the small brown prescription bottles from the cabinet, weighed it in her palm, gave it a gentle shake. It sounded half-full. She thoughtfully replaced the bottle, rinsed her mouth, and paused for a moment, listening, before stepping into the shower. Now he's snoring, she thought in revulsion. Jesus. Shake the house down, bastard. Jesus, listen to him!

She showered. She dried herself. She sprayed her armpits with deodorant. She took the same brown bottle from the medicine cabinet, twisted off the safety cap, poured the contents into the palm of her hand. Counted them. Returned them to the bottle and the bottle to the cabinet. Thought, Oh God. Oh God. You can't know what it's like. You can't know how it is with him. You just can't know.

Oh, but I can, I do, I know all about it.

Listen: think of me as a spider sitting in one strategic corner of a vast yet fine web that covers the entire city. So fine is this web that no one can move or speak or even think without the vibrations thereof being instantly transmitted to me. And, like a spider, I am discriminating. A leaf caught in my web will not rouse me. But let something with juice in it come my way, and I will suck it dry and ... ah, well, you get the idea; it will hardly do to press too hard on my little puppeteer-cum-spider metaphor. I might just as well speak of driving dumb beasts before me.

What matters is that I know all about it. All about all of it. Nothing escapes my attention. I absorb everything, and I know, for instance, that everybody (and I do not mean to exclude myself; in this respect, at least, I am just like everyone else) is hungry

for something. Power, immortality, love. Revenge. A combination, sometimes, of all four and more besides. I spread my web over the city, and back to me come all the great and small hungers, and all the knowledge of the various and sundry ways by which attempts are made to appease those appetites. There is the bottle, and the needle, and violence. There is sex. There are the selfish acts and the selfless ones. There is applause. There is death. In my case, there is the peerless ability to influence the thoughts and actions of two particular people whom I have methodically and with considerable cunning and precision manipulated into an earthly hell.

Fair is fair. I must be attended day and night, which is, after all, why I have been consigned to this place. Another earthly hell. I cannot feed myself: my fingers have one joint apiece and are webbed besides; my thumbs are stubs, mere hard bumps protruding from the sides of what pass for my hands. I cannot move myself: my legs are badly mismatched; my feet are only boneless swellings, with an odd number of randomly placed nails in the general area of where toes ought to be, at the bottoms of what pass for my calves—I have no ankles. Nor do I have much control over my stomach, my salivary glands, my bladder and bowels. My body is squashed-looking, shoulderless, chestless, all gut and buttocks. My head is equipped with the correct number of sensory organs, but they are erratically positioned, and only half of them function. I cannot talk. I cannot hear, though, with my web, I miss nothing. It has been thought of me that I belong with the other gargoyles atop Notre Dame Cathedral. It has been thought of me that I should have died the moment I entered the world. I will never know the love of another human being.

But.

They did not speak to each other at the breakfast table. They avoided eye contact. He did not give her even the usual perfunctory kiss when he left the house. She made herself another cup of coffee and sipped it slowly and thought about the brown bottle in the medicine cabinet. Abruptly, she began to cry.

At noon, he passed up lunch to drink instead. He imagined his wife lying broken and still at the bottom of the basement steps. He imagined himself standing at the top of the steps, looking down at her. He put his face into his hands and said, "Oh, my God," and trembled violently.

But I am in control.

So I draw them back from the brink of the abyss, not so far, of course, that they will not suffer great anguish for having actually, seriously contemplated murdering each other, but far enough so that they will attempt, once again, to regain that which I long ago took from them. The love. The real and shining and glorious love. The love that made me. The love that was to have sustained them when they saw how poorly they had made me. The love that they could not extend to me, and that has

been no match at all for what I have here inside my grotesque nine-year-old head.

And now Mommy and Daddy are at home again. And now they try to kiss and make up.